

Response to “Flowers in the Dark: African American Consciousness, Laughter, and Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”

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In her reading of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, Jacqueline Bussie focused on laughter as “a creative, counter-hegemonic mode of ethical and theological resistance for the disenfranchised African American community” (175). As aptly summarized by the title of her chapter, for Bussie, laughter in *Beloved* attests to the independent consciousness of African Americans under the yoke of slavery and envisions the impossible possibility of resistance and liberation. Walking us through the stories of Baby Suggs, Sixo, and Paul D, Bussie illustrates laughter as 1) engendered by a collision of narratives, 2) challenging, transforming, and re-appropriating language, and 3) contributing to the formation of personal identity and communal solidarity. What lies at the heart of black laughter is the “experience of the world as paradoxical and incongruous” (182), or, the consciousness of the co-existence of “hope and tragedy, joy and pain, despair and love” (185), the so-called “both-and” consciousness of African American community.

Attentive to textual details, perceptive of their ethical/theological implications, and adept at invoking a wide range of theorists to shed light on her thesis, Bussie successfully claimed her reader’s attention and admiration. However, upon finishing her chapter, I felt an urge to re-read Morrison’s novel, because the question that arose to haunt me from the very first page remained unsolved even after my encounter, as carefully guided by Bussie, with Baby Suggs the preacher of laughter, Sixo the laughing rebel, and Paul D the emulator of Sixo. The question is: given that Sethe is the protagonist of Morrison’s novel, why is her laughter, together with that of her daughters, *Beloved* and Denver, absent from Bussie’s discussion? Did they laugh? What is the significance of their laughter? In what follows I will briefly review some of the occasions on which Sethe, *Beloved*, and Denver laughed, with an eye towards excavating from the novel an alternative interpretation of black laughter, one that aspires to complement Bussie’s exploration into the complexities of our human condition.

Bussie characterized black laughter as the Bakhtinian grotesque in the sense that it is celebration in the midst of suffering, claim for freedom in the grip of death, and, in short, the rupture in language as produced by the conjoining and clashing of conflicting narratives. However, the laughter of Sethe and her daughters, far from being grotesque, is quotidian to the point of evading Bussie’s radar. Sethe laughed when she went to the carnival with Paul D and Denver. Denver laughed when she saw *Beloved* devoured sweets, her own favorites too. *Beloved* and Denver laughed when they danced together in their shabby, lonesome room. Mother and daughters burst into laughter when they arrived home from the pouring rain. Their laughter springs from simple yearnings and easy satisfactions, such as love of sugar, company, and shelter, and hence falls outside the contours of black laughter as drawn by Bussie. In the stories of Baby Suggs, Sixo, and Paul D, social solidarity is born from public worship, scene of execution, and daily conversation, all electrified with black laughter. In a different light, if not by contrast, for Sethe, *Beloved*, and Denver, personal intimacy is the invisible echo of another form of laughter, one that seems to be trivial and insignificant.

After all, the drama between evil power and heroic resistance is written on the blank page of everyday life, whereas this blankness, upon a closer look, reveals itself as a bewildering whirlwind of minute, almost negligible, and even inexplicable emotions and moves. It is in this blankness that both hope and tragedy are rooted. On the one hand, our characters managed to survive by “working dough” (Sethe), loving “just a little bit” (Paul D), and laughing not too hard, that is, not for ostensible or immediate protest or resistance. On the other hand, how shall we account for the eerie silence of the black community when schoolteacher went after the run-away slaves, a silence that was not irresponsible for Sethe’s desperate murder of her baby daughter? Here I am not suggesting that we should direct our attention away from the structural, systemic evil of slavery and the indestructible independent consciousness of the oppressed. My point is that the grotesque goes hand in hand with the quotidian, whereas the paradox of incongruous juxtapositions, without taking on the flesh and blood of everyday life, is only a conceptual skeleton and cannot be said as fully alive. In other words, between annihilation and regeneration, ordinary life fills in. The very task of Morrison’s novel as read by Bussie, namely, exposing radical evil and articulating radical hope, depends on a literary re-construction of the ordinary, from which radicality evolves, into which radicality dissolves. Overlooking the quotidian side of black laughter, Bussie’s reading highlights the collision of narratives in the grotesque laughter at the expense of missing the very collision of the quotidian and grotesque, one that enlivens Morrison’s novel.

Moreover, I also noticed that, at the end of her chapter, Bussie behooved her readers to hear the stories of the oppressed. However, the novel is not just stories but the telling of stories. What’s missing from Bussie’s reading is not only the quotidian laughter but also the aesthetical appeal of Morrison’s writing, with which the purposeless, meaningless laughter, or merely the soundless smile, of Sethe, her daughters, and many other characters resonates. With its vivid imagery, mesmerizing rhythm, emotional charge, and narrative sophistication, Morrison’s fictional language confronts the language of slavery and racism no less forcefully than the grotesque laughter of her characters. In this light, I would like to suggest that, after Sethe’s murder of her own child, Baby Suggs’ contemplation of color both indicates her abandonment of celebratory/protesting laughter and symbolizes our novelist’s indulgence in and maneuver of words. That is to say, although our character could no longer sustain the paradox of faith and despair and retrieved into silence (as read by Bussie), the text, in portraying her contemplation, sustains the paradox of eloquence and silence, as well as that of resistance and retrieval, in the sense that it is not impossible for the seemingly apolitical retrieval of art to offer itself as a form of resistance against the social status quo. Last and not the least important, to reiterate one of my earlier observations, it is the laughter absent from Bussie’s discussion that generates, although not solidarity in some common cause, emotional and embodied intimacy, something indispensable for the formation of personal and communal identities as well.

At this point I have unpacked the significance of the quotidian laughter of Sethe and her daughters in correspondence to Bussie’s explication of black laughter as grotesque. What I have aimed to demonstrate so far is the internal complexities of black laughter, the ethical potential of fictional art, and the fact that Morrison’s novel not only encapsulates but also instantiates the so-called black laughter.